You vs. Negative Errors: Strategies for a Winning Approach

Objectives

- Learn what a "negative error" is

- Learn why a low Negative Error Rate (NER) is important

- Learn the top causes of negative errors

- Learn the possible solutions that will help you avoid creating negative errors

What is a negative error?

A negative error happens when SNAP is denied, terminated, or suspended incorrectly.

Did you know a negative error can result when…

…a Notice Of Missed Interview (NOMI) is not issued to the client?

…an application is denied too early?

…a case is not identified and/or processed for expedited SNAP correctly?

Did you know a negative error can result when…

…a full 10 days is not allowed for clients to return necessary verifications?

…SNAP is denied or terminated for failure to provide verifications that are not mandatory?

…SNAP is denied or terminated for failure to provide verifications when the required verification has been provided?

What is the NEGATIVE ERROR RATE and how is it determined?

Every month, Quality Control (QC) pulls a random sample of SNAP applications which were denied and SNAP cases which were terminated or suspended.

QC reviews the denial/closure/suspension to determine if the action was correct.

The Negative Error Rate (NER) is the percentage of cases that are found in error.

Having a low Negative Error Rate is important because:

It reflects good customer service.

It shows pride in your individual and departmental performance.

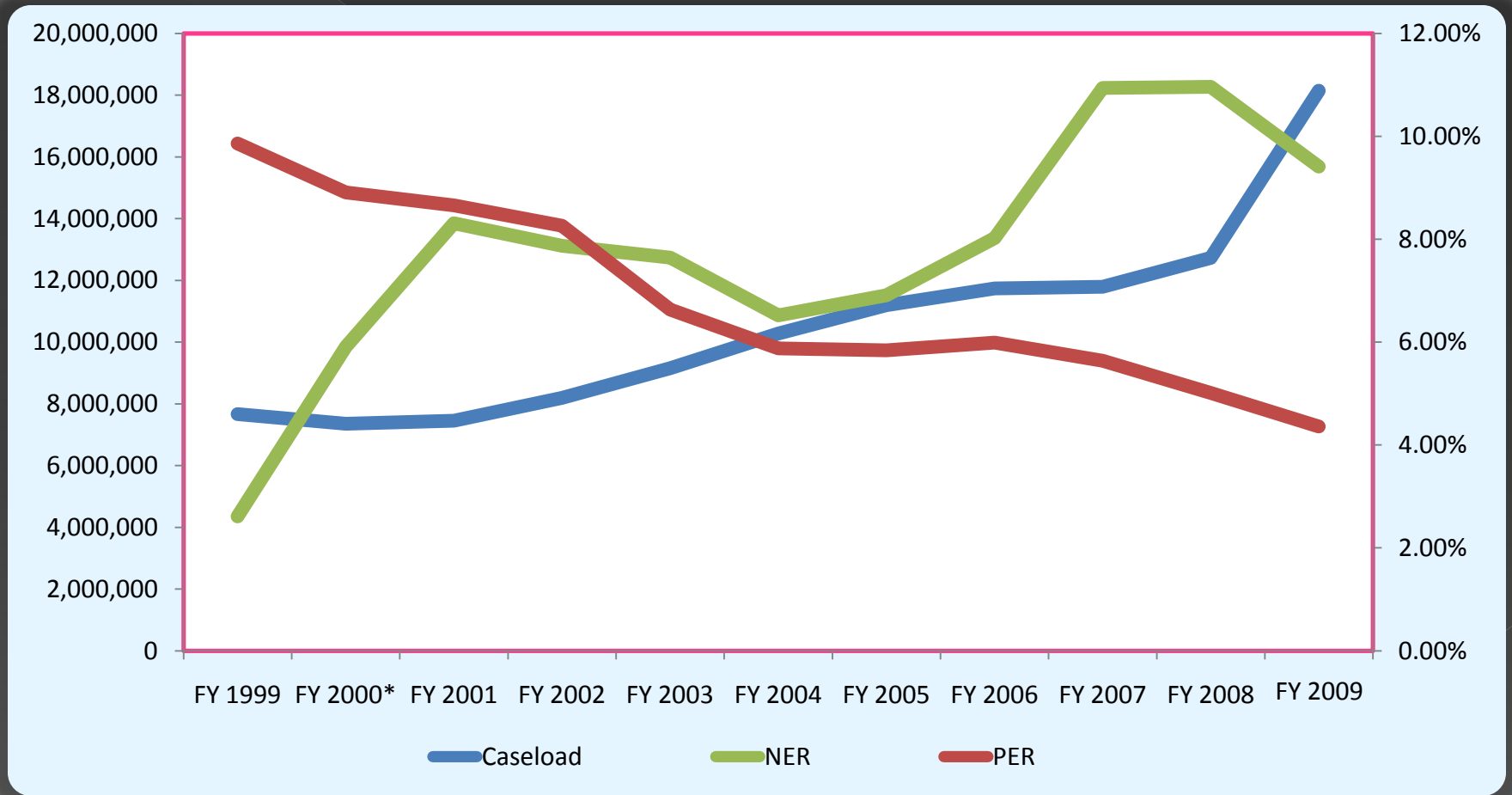It may qualify your State for a high performance bonus payment.

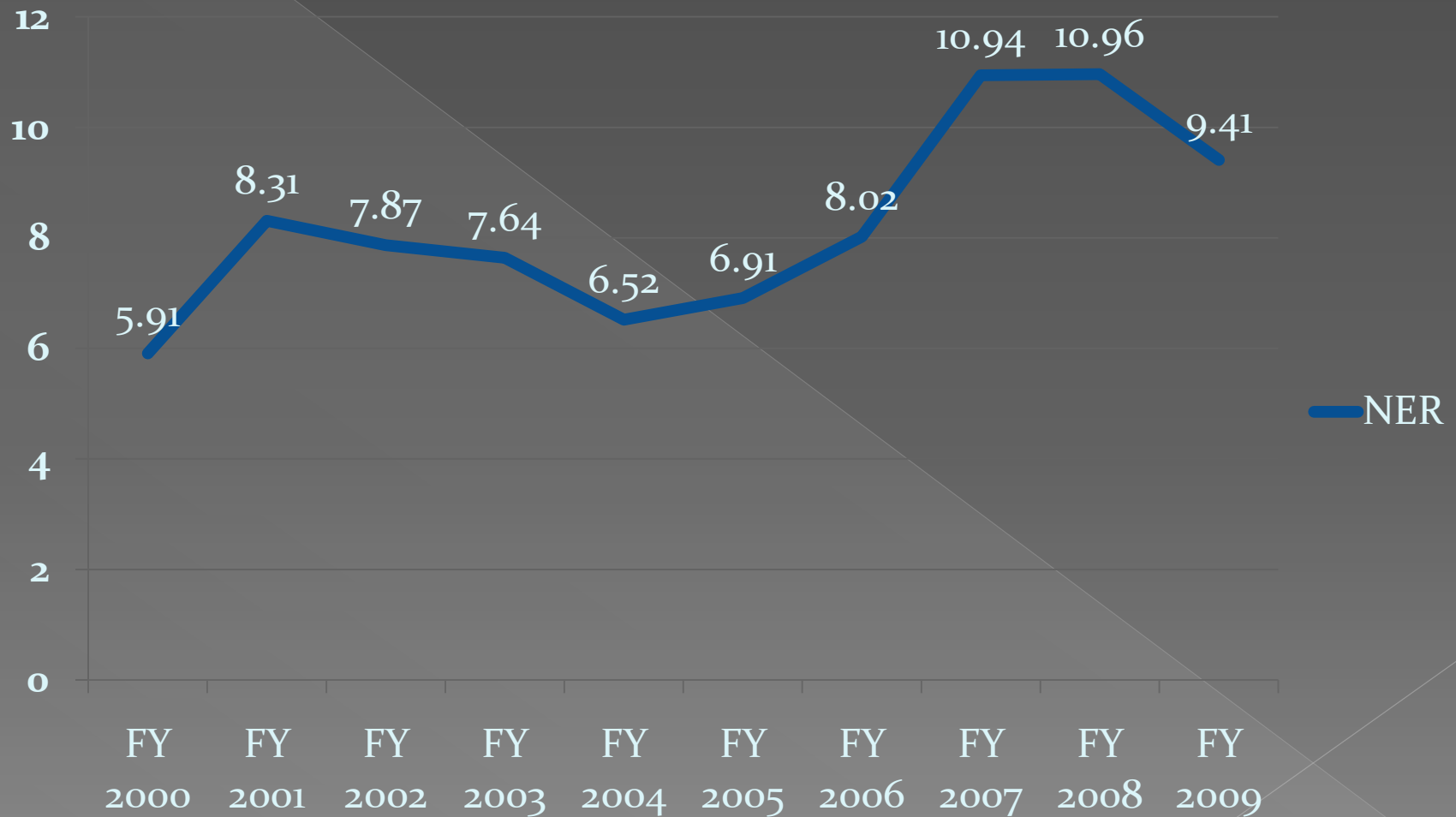As shown on the following charts, the NER in Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 was the highest it had been in 10 years.

While the higher caseloads may seem like a logical conclusion, the Payment Error Rate (PER) was the LOWEST it had been in 10 years in FY 2008, and dropped even lower in FY 2009.
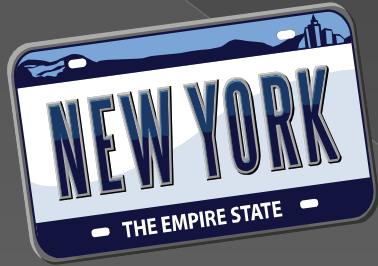
Note: When a State's NER equals or exceeds one percent, a Corrective Action Plan is required.

Caseload and Error Rate Trends

National Negative Error Rates
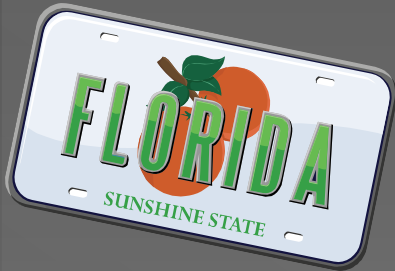

	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002	FY 2003	FY 2004	FY 2005	FY 2006	FY 2007	FY 2008	FY 2009
NER	5.91	8.31	7.87	7.64	6.52	6.91	8.02	10.94	10.96	9.41

To see why negative errors were on the rise, during Calendar Year (CY) 2009, the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) National Payment Accuracy Work Group (NPAWG) completed an in-depth analysis in 5 of the largest States in the Country.

In each of the 5 States, NPAWG reviewed the QC files of invalid negative action cases and interviewed State and Local staff to compile the top causes of negative errors and develop a list of possible solutions to help offices avoid negative errors.

Of the invalid negative action case files reviewed by NPAWG:

72% occurred when a worker did not follow the required process

28% were due to misapplication of policy.

Further analysis of the case review data for two of the five States reviewed by NPAWG revealed that 55% of those households denied or terminated incorrectly for SNAP reapplied and were approved within SIX months; and over half of those actually came back within TWO months.

Let's look at what this means in terms of numbers on a National level…

9,685,644 (the estimated number of negative actions in FY 2009)
x 9.41% (the National NER for FY 2009)
= 911,419 households that were incorrectly denied or terminated SNAP benefits!

If 55% of these households reapplied and were approved within six months as observed during the NPAWG reviews, it would be like handling

501,050 households TWICE!

Who has time for that?

The following observations and possible solutions were compiled from the NPAWG reviews to assist local offices in minimizing negative errors. An additional bonus of the possible solutions is that they may enhance and improve performance in other areas, such as payment accuracy, timeliness, customer service, not to mention workload management…

Keep in mind, not every strategy fits the circumstances in your office.

Observations: Communication

One of the biggest factors in strong program performance is communication at all levels.

It is critical that all staff know what a negative error is, its importance to customer service, and how the State and local office are performing.

Possible Solutions: Communication

- *Stay informed of the monthly NER (State and local).*

- *Be aware of the causal factors of negative error cases in your office and the State.*

- *Attend and participate in staff meetings to enhance communication and teamwork.*

- *Review staff newsletters and memoranda to learn about error prone areas, tips, policy changes, etc.*

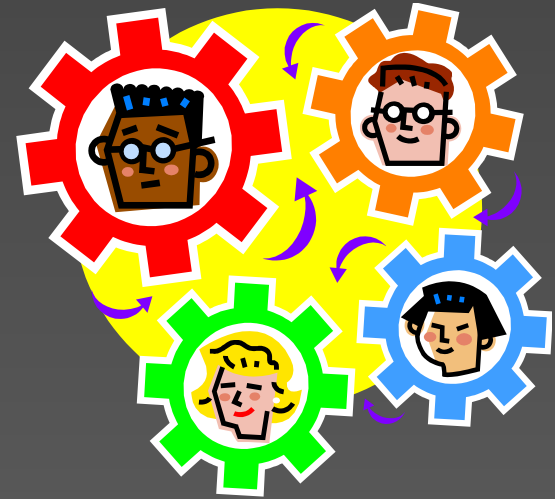# Possible Solutions: Communication

- *Participate in improvement discussions/workgroups when there is opportunity to do so.*

- *Identify and share best practices within your local office and the State.*

- *Celebrate successes of correct negative action cases.*

Observations: Office Procedures/ Workflow

When office operating procedures are not being followed, or they are not kept up to date to reflect changes, the workflow of the office may not be as efficient as it can be.

This includes delays in processing or scanning verifications which can lead to erroneous denials/closures/suspensions.

Possible Solutions: Office Procedures/Workflow

Identify areas that can be simplified and streamlined. Workflow improvements can minimize interruptions and distractions.

Thoroughly document case files, including all conversations and other issues leading to the negative action.

Maintain an organized workspace.

Observations: Systems/Automation

When workers have to access multiple systems to either process the case or find the necessary information, there is an increased likelihood of errors occurring.

Lost/misfiled documentation and/or paper case files are significant factors in many invalid negative actions.
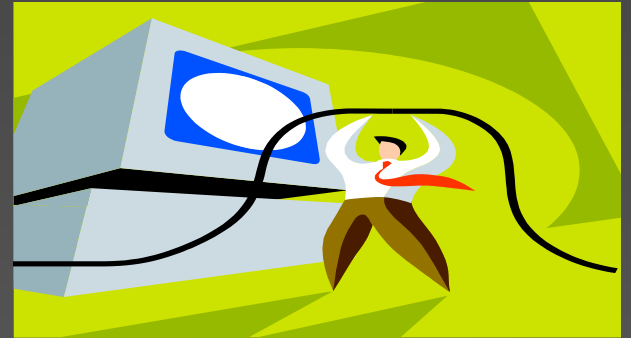
Observations: Systems/Automation

System safeguards that are not effectively programmed may be bypassed by staff (i.e. staff simply press "enter" to get to next screen without reading the pop-up message).

When eligibility system issues are not resolved timely, staff are more likely to create error prone work-arounds.

Possible Solutions: Systems/Automation

Document imaging/Electronic Case Files can prevent errors due to lost documentation. To be most successful, safeguards must be implemented to ensure documents are scanned and electronically filed timely and accurately.

For offices with paper case files, ensure all case files are accounted for (caseload reconciliation).

Possible Solutions: Systems/Automation

Avoid work-arounds that alter the eligibility determination or are short-cuts. Notify supervisor/manager immediately when system fixes are necessary. Make suggestions.

Don't simply bypass pop-up windows. The messages are there to prompt you to double-check your work.

**Read Me…**

Observations: Policy and Training

It is vital that staff know policy and understand the budgeting process, not just the technology/systems component.

Policy can sometimes be confusing or contradictory.

Observations:
Policy and Training

When workers do not realize that negatives are not included in the timeliness measure, it can result in workers denying cases too early to maintain timeliness of application processing.

Staff do not routinely receive training on negative errors. Procedures such as issuing NOMIs, and granting a full 10 days for clients to return verifications are critical to valid negative actions.
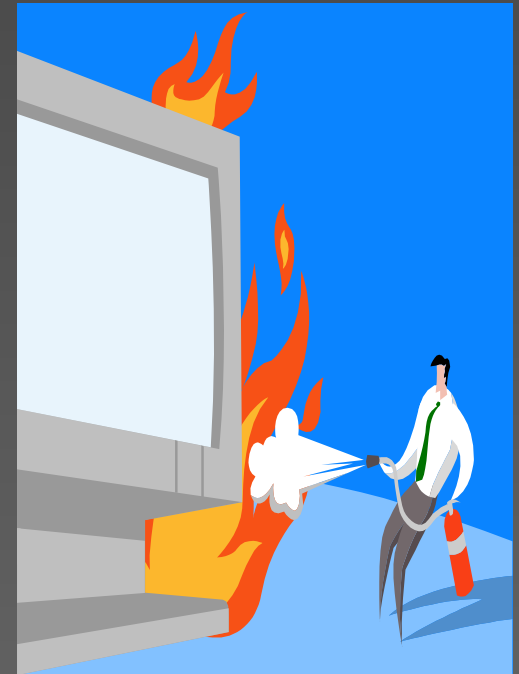
Possible Solutions: Policy and Training

Utilize available resources such as desk aids, charts, and other tools (but ensure they are current!).

Review SNAP budget before finalizing action.

Possible Solutions: Policy and Training

Another set of eyes is always helpful. Ask a colleague to review your case if in doubt.

Remember denials are not included in the Application Processing Timeliness measure.

Possible Solutions: Policy and Training

Ensure verification checklists specify what's needed (including period of time documents must cover if appropriate) with the due date.

Encourage customers to have verifications into the office earlier than verification deadline date.

Use alternative means to verify required client information (i.e. collateral contacts).

Unlike active payment errors, where we often rely on our customers to report accurate information and changes in circumstances, negative errors are totally within our hands.

We, ourselves, can improve the negative error rate.

Any questions???